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Title : Diving with Walruses: Feeding behaviour of wild walruses with comments on ostensible dextrality*

Category : Behavior

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Abstract : Direct observations of underwater behaviour of free-living marine mammals are, by their very nature, rare. This is particularly true for large and potentially dangerous species such as the walrus (Odobenus rosmarus). In this study, the underwater feeding behaviour of wild adult male Atlantic walruses (O. r. rosmarus) is documented for the first time by scuba divers.

During July and August 2001, twelve video-recordings involving at least five different foraging adult male walruses were made in Young Sound, Northeast Greenland. The walruses showed four different foraging behaviours; removing sediment by beating the right flipper, removing sediment by beating the left flipper, removing sediment by use of a water-jet from the mouth or rooting through sediment with the muzzle. The video recordings indicated a predisposition for use of the right front flipper during feeding. This tendency towards dextrality was explored by examining a museum collection of extremities of walrus skeletons. Measurements of the dimensions of forelimbs from 23 walrus skeletons revealed that the length of the right scapula, humerus, and ulna was significantly greater than that of the left, supporting these field observations.

We suggest that the four feeding behaviours observed are typical of walruses in general, although walruses in other parts of their range may have evolved other types of feeding behaviour.

* The presented results are based on a paper in revision, BMC Ecology